

January 15, 2017

“Martin Luther King”

Melissa Spindler-Virgin

RESPONSIVE READING #1 – Beatitudes– Gospel of Matthew 5:3-11

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

We are blessed when we are at the end of our rope. With less of us, there is more of God.

⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

We are blessed when we feel we’ve lost what is most dear to us. Only then can we be embraced by the One most dear to us.

⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

We are blessed when we are content with just who we are – no more, no less. That’s the moment we find ourselves proud owners of everything that cannot be bought.

⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

We are blessed when we’ve worked up a good appetite for God. God’s food and drink are the best meal we can ever eat.

⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

We are blessed when we care. At the moment we are being most ‘care-full’, we find ourselves cared for.

⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

We are blessed when we get our inside world – our mind and heart – put right. Then we can see God in the outside world.

⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

We are blessed when we can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when we discover who we really are, and our place in God’s family.

¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

We are blessed when our commitment to God provokes persecution. Then that persecution drives us even deeper into God's Kingdom.

SERMON #1: GANDHI WOKE UP EVERY MORNING

MLK QUOTE: As I delved deeper into the philosophy of [Mahatma] Gandhi, my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform... Love, for Gandhi, was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and non violence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking. (23-24)

Every morning - for 40 years, Mahatma Gandhi (a Hindu), read and meditated on the Sermon on the Mount, the biblical story of Jesus that is depicted in our stained glass. The Beatitudes we just read are the central teaching of that sermon, this picture right in front of us. These ideas of what people are most blessed, of when in our lives we are at our best, our most lovable selves – these Beatitudes were so important to Gandhi's concept of love that he sat with them every day. Just as we sit with them every Sunday. He woke up to these ideas each morning.

Gandhi started his days with a demand on his attention for the day: live these values in the coming hours. He would meditate on this list, breathing deep into his body on the knowledge that brokenness opens us to something greater than ourselves. Loss, sadness, struggle are inevitable and to-be survived by opening ourselves to a comfort outside of our isolated self.

What we hear in these Beatitudes is that Humans, as humans, are valuable... worthy of being seen, recognized. Loved. Here among our imperfection is the Love that is our path into the today and tomorrow and the next. The blessing, the goodness, the spirit of love is in the daily human experience of mourning and thirsting, and struggling to be merciful.

For 40 years Gandhi started each day meditating on this list, this picture of what is holy, what is of value – where we should be directing our attention - *That* which he would allow to be Lord is LOVE. And during those years, with this focus in front of him, he accomplished truly amazing changes in the world, helping to bring peace, standing up against tyranny and hatred.

It was Gandhi's concept of love, grounded in these Beatitudes, that enabled his incredible work for freedom in South Africa and India. It was Gandhi's concept of love that emboldened Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. to spend his career walking with those boycotting the segregated busing system of Montgomery, sitting in at lunch counters, writing letters from a Birmingham jail. As both Gandhi and Dr. King were persecuted for their work, they both continually returned to their faith that there was a deep love in the human experience of being poor of spirit, of mourning... there was a powerful blessing in the hunger for justice... Both of these incredible men knew that the love of God called them to be peacemakers, to be merciful, to continually work to put right their hearts in the face of the hatred and injustice they worked against. Let us wake up to these concepts of love that are carved in glass in front of us, that guided Gandhi and Dr. King before us. Blessed are those who wake up each day and face themselves toward love.

May it be so.

Responsive Reading #2 – Reflection on Our Seven Principles

By [Michael E. Sallwasser](#)

Congregation: *We, the member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:*

The inherent worth and dignity of every person

Leader: We promote the first and most honored principle of our Association by opening our pulpit to all. We affirm the dignity of every person when we value their thoughtful and heartfelt opinions enough to provide a forum to express them.

C: *Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations*

L: When our speech challenges the injustice and inequity we see and experience in the world, we are called to do so with compassion for the oppressor as well as the oppressed.

C: *Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations*

L: It is often through words that we demonstrate acceptance or rejection of someone else's spiritual journey. By choosing our words carefully when expressing our individual beliefs, we can encourage others on their chosen path by intentionally acknowledging the multiplicity of spokes to the spiritual center.

C: *A free and responsible search for truth and meaning*

L: How better to affirm and promote a free and responsible search than to provide a marketplace for those who are searching to share the fruits of their quest?

C: *The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large*

L: Free speech is the cornerstone of democracy. When repressive regimes seize power, speech is the first freedom they crush. When people rise up, it is because they are emboldened by speech that is free.

C: *The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.*

L: This is our challenge: to broaden the sphere of our influence, to build a community of those outside these walls. If today strengthens our convictions, then we have done well.

C: *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

L: We are intimately connected and profoundly dependent on one another. Not the least of what we need from one another is the infusion of new ideas, new ways of thinking, that help us to better understand each other and ourselves.

SERMON #2: That Which is Holy

As a young man with most of my life ahead of me, I decided early on to give my life to something eternal and absolute. Not to these little gods that are here today and gone tomorrow. But to God who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. (33)

Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate and evil. The greatest way to do that is through love. I believe firmly that love is a transforming power that can lift a whole community to new horizons of fair play, good will, and justice. (63)

Jesus's beatitudes were central to Dr. King's faith and work for justice.

So... here's the thing about the beatitudes that gets me – they insist on a concept of “that which is HOLY”. Kingdom of Heaven. God's Blessing. The Divine. Nirvana. Ultimate. Love.

I recently found this wedged in my car's steering wheel. My husband hides this smiling heart stress-ball for me to find – it is an image of the love that is central to our marriage. I invite the children to use the playdoh to make images of what is most important in your life. For the adults, what images do

you have of “that which is holy.” That which is Divine, or sacred... that comprises the kingdom of heaven, that which is eternal and absolute. God.

There are an endless list of synonyms, so what does it actually mean? It means that there is something in this life that is worth our energy, worthy of our worship.

Jesus’s beatitudes – the grounding force of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr – these 8 items tell us that GOD.... This thing that is worthy of our worship and attention and love... is here amongst our own lived experiences. Holy is those who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who covenant to recognize the worth and dignity of all people.

These UU principles also carve out for us a concept of what is worthy of our attention, that which we worship, that which rules our lives in this sanctuary. Our imagine of the Divine is when we recognize the worth and dignity of ALL people, not just those who we agree with, who vote along a party line or think we’re pretty or like our cat. We Wake up on Sunday mornings and come here to start our week with a commitment to this community and to the world community. We come here because we want to promote the acceptance of one another and encouragement toward spiritual growth... justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. We come to affirm a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Love is the Spirit. Love is in our here and now, and love is our future.

Hush. Freedom and justice are calling your name.

Tomorrow we honor the birth of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr – a prophet of our times... a beacon of hope and love, a man who dreamt of the kingdom of heaven here between us. As we prepare for this holiday, we – as a congregation – are also journeying together through issues of racial justice: This Thursday will be the first of three part series entitled Revolutionary Conversations, as Bishop John Selders works with our SOS Justice team to help our congregation engage the concepts of the Black Lives Matter movement and the many privileges and protections of light skin over dark.

And later this week, our country will swear in a new president –

A man who – like every one before him – will do some things right and some things wrong, who some people will hate and some will love. And all of us will continue to be responsible for shaping our world each day, for insisting on the worth and dignity of all people.

2017 will be calling us to make some decisions about what side we stand on. MLK, Gandhi, Jesus. All these prophets call us to find THAT WHICH IS WORTHY OF OUR LOVING ATTENTION AND ADORATION is here among us. In those of us who are poor of spirit, mourning, meek. There is worth and dignity in all of us who struggle, despair, or tremble. Like Rip Van Winkle, we have to wake up! The world is changing around us – and what path do we want to take? How do we know what direction we should be moving?

Let us name, and wake up to, that which is holy. May it be so.

Reading #3 – Beatitudes of Risk-Takers

Adapted from Robin Tanner

Leader: Blessed are they who fall in the mud, who jump with gusto and rip the pants, who skin the elbows, and bruise the ego, for they shall know the sweetness of risk.

Congregation: *Blessed are they who make giant mistakes, whose intentions are good but impact has injured, who know the hot sense of regret and ask for mercy, for their hearts will know the gift of forgiveness.*

L: Blessed are they who have seen a D or an F or C or any letter less than perfect, who are painfully familiar with the red pen and the labels as "less than," for they know the wisdom in the imperfect.

C: *Blessed are they who try again, who dust off, who wash up, who extend the wish for peace, who return to sites of failure, who are dogged in their pursuit, for they will discover the secret to dreams.*

L: Blessed are they who wildly, boldly abandon winning, for they shall know the path of justice.

C: *Blessed are they who see beyond the surface of another, for they will be able to delight in the gift of compassion.*

L: Blessed are they who stop running the race to help a fellow traveler, who pick up the fallen, who stop for injured life, for they shall know the kindness of strangers.

C: Blessed are they who refuse to listen to the naysayers, for their hearts will be houses for hope.

SERMON 3: BELOVED COMMUNITY

History has thrust upon our generation an indescribably important destiny – to complete a process of democratization which our nation has too long developed too slowly, but which is our most powerful weapon for world respect and emulation. How we deal with this crucial situation will determine our moral health as individuals, our cultural health as a region, our political health as a nation, and our prestige as a leader of the free world.
(100)

Growing up I was told the story of the Messiah... the world changer... the one who had come before who had paved the road of how I should live my life.

This person had lived a life grounded in peace. He was so sure of the worth of humanity, that he dedicated his life to fighting for the rights of his fellow person, his neighbor.

This person was a man – in the story I was told – but could easily have been a woman or somewhere in between. The details that mattered to me, in the version I was told, was that this man was real. This man was of the “wrong” and lesser class. In the story I was told, he was dark skinned (though he could have easily been Jewish, or Muslim, or queer, or differently-abled depending on the version you were raised with)

He lived in a land not too far away.

This person spent his days among the people.

He preached to the masses.

He fed and uplifted the poor.

He was not well off, but he was well educated in his religion – and he believed in his religion – believed that at it’s core was something of such deep value, something so deeply true, that it could start to create the Kingdom of God right here, in our now.

He questioned all the rules and laws that were dividing people. And he dreamed of the Beloved Community. Children of God. Hand in hand.

He dreamed of a day when you and I would look into each others eyes – across all our differences – and see in each other someone who was wearied, tired, meek – a person who had struggled, was struggling, who had made missteps in life and deserved mercy.

He dreamed that we would look into each others eyes and find someone looking back at us who could see that we were a child of God, a shining star, a piece of that which is Holy.

The story of a world-changer... a peacemaker... a messiah. I was told the story of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. – a man who believed in the worth and dignity of all people.

Blessed are those who doubt. Blessed are the spiritually impoverished, those who struggle for hope, for whom nothing seems to be working.

Blessed are those whose bodies are fighting the fiercest of fights. Blessed are those who have loved enough to know what loss really feels like.

Blessed are those who can't fall apart because too many people are counting on them.

Blessed are those who are “supposed” to be grown-ups but can't reconcile what they love with societal expectations of income.

Blessed are those who know the sting of failure or rejection.

Blessed are those who believe life can be better than this.

Blessed are those who believe in the power of love to transform the world toward justice.

Our children collected into their honey bee hives, 8 cards – each with a little honey BEE on it, with Jesus's teachings from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus's “How-to-BEE”-Attitude. What is holy, what is sacred, is an attitude with which we face our daily living. Jesus says look to those who hunger and thirst for a better world. Those who are following a [4] free and responsible search for truth and meaning – who are educating themselves about the issues that are swarming around in their community... [5] who acknowledge the right of conscience and use the democratic process – [6] with a goal always of world community of peace, liberty, and justice for ALL. FOR ALL. [7] Because we respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Because all of us, at some time, are the ones who are poor in spirit, who are mourning or meek. Each of us knows what it is to receive mercy. Flawed

and often inept, we choose to keep facing ourselves toward that which we name as holy. Each of us is an integral part of the Beloved Community. We strive to be pure of heart, peacemakers who hunger and thirst for that better world for all people. We wake up and *choose* to stand on the side of LOVE – today, tomorrow, and for the future we build for our children. We wake up and choose to learn about this movement of BLACK LIVES MATTER, and work to come together. We wake up and choose to stand our values in the face of everything else around us.

Everyday offers opportunities to take risks... to wake up and stand boldly... to march for the rights of those who are not rich white heterosexual cis-gendered able-bodied men. We who believe in freedom cannot rest.

Martin Luther King Jr. woke up and told us that he had a dream of a beloved community, a dream where people had equal access to the opportunities that would allow us to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, NOT a world where some are more likely to be shot or lynched on their journeys to prosperity because their skin had a different amount of pigment.

Gandhi started his day – every day - waking up, and breathing deep into himself the values he wanted to live by. Whether it's the 10 commandments or the beatitudes or the UU principles... each day our lives give us the chance to wake up, open our eyes, and face ourselves in a direction.

What is your image of THAT which is Holy? What lamp will guide your each day? What side will we stand on? Gandhi and Dr. King and JESUS all agree: Let us stand on the side of Love.